DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 041 258 AL 002 454

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TITLE Development of a Manipulation-Communication Scale.
PUB DATE [69]
NOTE 3p.

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.25
DESCRIPTORS Advanced Students, Classroom Techniques, *Communication (Thought Transfer), *English (Second Language), *Language Instruction, Pattern Drills (Language), Reading Skills, Teaching Techniques, Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Gurrey Question Classification

ABSTRACT

Teachers have been increasingly worried for more than a decade about the effectiveness of English as a second language instruction in the United States at the intermediate and advanced levels. This article investigates briefly the causes of this situation and suggests a theoretical guideline--a scale of manipulation and communication teaching techniques which would allow for a gradual and orderly transition from activities that emphasize the development of basic linguistic skills to activities designed to encourage the free communication of thought. Communicative classroom activities are defined as those that allow the student to find the words and structures he uses. Manipulative activities are those in which the student receives the words and structures from teacher, tape, or book. The movement from manipulation to communication does not have to be abrupt, and probably the shift should never be total, even in the most advanced classes. One result of the application of the scale, which would make use of Gurrey's classification of questions, might be a blurring of the sharp line separating language courses from literature courses. (AMM)

ED041258

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Development of a Manipulation-Communication Scale

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TO JUDGE BY THE TOPICS OF PAPERS read at scholarly meetings, teachers have been increasingly worried for a decade or more about the effectiveness of the instruction in English as a second language that goes on in the United States at the intermediate and advanced levels. We are comparatively satisfied with our elementary classes and have produced a respectable number of successful texts for beginners or near-beginners. But at more advanced levels we are bedeviled by uncertainties as to our aims, lack of conviction in our choice of classroom activities, and a persistent shortage of good teaching materials.

The purpose of this article is to investigate briefly the causes of this situation and to suggest a theoretical guideline that may be of help in remedying our deficiencies.

In the opening sentence of his *Gallic War*, Julius Caesar notes the fact that "all Gaul is divided into three parts." The most notable fact about most language departments is somewhat similar. All, or almost all, are divided into two quite distinct, often antagonistic, parts: language and literature. The language courses, which are usually assigned to the youngest and most defenseless members of the staff, tend today to be devoted to drill work of a rather mechanical sort and are likely to have little intellectual content. On the other hand, the courses in literature, typically reserved for senior personnel, are either taught largely in the mother tongue of the student or, if conducted in the second language, make no deliberate systematic attempt to help the student improve his practical command of that language. In the two sets of courses, aims, methods, and subject matter are utterly dissimilar. If another paraphrase is permissible, language is language, and literature is literature, and never the twain shall meet.[1]

Sources of difficulty

It is just such a meeting—of language and literature—that is called for in the intermediate or advanced class in English as a second language. The unfortunate dichotomy prevailing in our language departments means that we have little precedent for the kind of course that makes a gradual and orderly transition from activities that emphasize the development of basic linguistic skills to activities designed to encourage the free communication of thought. It is apparent, then, that some of the difficulty we experience in pushing on beyond the beginning level stems directly from the prevalent concept of departmental organization and the consequent separation of language and literature.

An even more important source of our difficulty may lie in our current excessive dependence on the structural linguists as the fountainhead of our attitudes toward language teaching. There is no gainsaying the fact that we teachers of English as a second language owe the linguists a tremendous debt. One can no more deny the idea that language teaching must be grounded on linguistics—that is to say, on the body of knowledge we possess about the nature of language and of specific languages—than one can deny virtue, home, and mother. But it should be equally obvious that our discipline should rest on other foundations as well, particularly on that branch of psychology that deals with the nature of the learner and of the language-learning process.

Furthermore, American linguists have been notably uninterested in certain aspects of language with which the teacher must concern himself, especially in advanced classes. Since Bloomfield, the focus of attention in linguistic research has been the spoken language, with little attention paid to writing above the level of graphemics. Grammatical analysis has developed almost exclusively within the limits of the individual sentence, and there has been little study of the relationships between sentences in larger units such as the paragraph. Yet, the advanced student of English as a second language must be taught composition.

The importance of meaning

In their effort to develop more rigorous methods of linguistic analysis, the Bloomfieldians have tended to downgrade the importance of meaning as an element of language. However healthy this de-emphasis of meaning may have been in analytical work, it should never have been extended to the practical activities of the language classroom. In following the linguists too trustingly on this point, we language teachers have often fallen into grievous error: extended drills on nonsense syllables, failure to make sure that our students understand the sentences they are so assiduously repeating, the use of language that bears no relationship to the realities of the situation, exercises made up of totally disconnected sentences.

Perhaps most serious of all as a cause of the difficulties we are now experiencing in advanced instruction, we seem to have largely lost sight of the role of communication in language teaching. If meaning is not important, then neither is communication. Yet, even on the theoretical level, it should be easy to convince ourselves that communication is an essential component of language—that language bereft of its communicative function is not language at all but mere parroting.

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The teacher who underestimates the importance of communication is likely to attach correspondingly greater weight to another element of language that has a clear methodological significance—its systematic nature. One of the greatest services the linguists have rendered is to insist that a language is basically a system of structural signals by means of which a speaker indicates the relationship between content words. It follows that a primary aim of instruction must be to practice these arrangements of signals, these structural patterns, until they can be handled automatically as a matter of habit. Hence, our fully justified fondness for pattern practice.

We must realize, however, that pattern practice and communication are to a considerable degree antithetical. If our students are to form correct speech habits through pattern practice, we must not allow them to practice errors. Therefore, we must exercise strict controls, and must supply the proper words and structures in the form of an external model that we require the student to imitate. On the other hand, the beginning and essence of communication is the presence of a thought that the speaker wishes to share with a hearer, followed by that mysterious process whereby he produces from within himself the words and patterns that express thought. True communication implies the absence of external controls.

Two types of classroom activities

For the purposes of this article, then, we may define communicative classroom activities as those that allow the student himself to find the words and structures he uses. The other type of activity, in which he receives the words and structures from teacher, tape, or book, may be called —for want of a better word—a manipulative activity. In this sense, an example of pure manipulation would be a drill in which the students merely repeat sentences after the teacher. An example of pure communication would be a free conversation among the members of a class.

When we begin to analyze activities from this point of view, however, we soon discover that most of them do not fall entirely within either category but are mixtures of communication and manipulation in various proportions. Thus, a teacher can frame a question in such a way as to control the form of the student's answer to a considerable degree but still leave him some freedom in the choice of words: *Before you came to school this morning, what had you already done at home?* That one seems to involve a rather larger element of communication than of manipulation.

What all this has to do with the problems of advanced English instruction begins to become apparent when we reflect that the principal methodological change that should characterize the progression from the lower to the upper levels of language teaching is precisely the increased freedom of expression given students in the higher classes. In the beginning stages, the teacher exerts such rigorous control as to reduce the possibility of error to a minimum; at least, this is what happens in classes taught by the methods most widely approved today. At some later stage the time must inevitably come when these controls disappear, when oral pattern practice gives way to the discussion of ideas, and dictation is superseded by free composition. We may regard the whole process as a prolonged and gradual shift from manipulation to communication, accomplished through progressive decontrol. We determine the speed of the transition by allowing the student the possibility of making certain errors only when we are reasonably sure that he will no longer be likely to make them.

It is fortunate that the movement from manipulation to communication does not have to be made abruptly, and it is probable that the shift should never be total, even in the most advanced classes. Therein lies the importance of analyzing all the great range of possible language-teaching techniques from the point of view of their manipulation-communication content, and of arranging them in our minds along a sort of scale extending from the most manipulative to the most communicative types.

A four-way scale

In the development of a manipulation-communication scale, it may be helpful to divide classroom activities into at least four major groups: (1) *completely manipulative,* (2) *predominantly manipulative,* (3) *predominantly communicative,* and (4) *completely communicative.* For ease of reference, we can label these as groups *one, two, three,* and *four.* Obviously, the dimensions of this article will not permit an attempt at a complete classification of this sort, but a number of specific examples may be useful.

One of the currently most popular activities in language classes is the single-slot substitution drill: The teacher gives a model sentence, such as *My father is a doctor,* and asks the students to construct similar sentences by substituting for *doctor* a series of nouns of profession—*salesman, farmer, fisherman,* etc.—which the teacher also supplies orally. In this form the exercise is certainly completely manipulative and hence belongs in our group one. But by any of a number of slight changes we can turn it into a group-two activity and thus—even in an elementary class—come slightly closer to our ultimate goal of using language for communication. For instance, the students could individually substitute the name of their father's real profession. Such a change would, incidentally, avoid the element of silliness inherent in having the son of a professor chorusing that his father is a janitor. Another change that would permit a short step toward communication would be to cue the exercise visually, by means of a series of pictures, instead of cuing it orally. In this situation, though the structure is determined by the teacher, the student supplies at least a single word in each sentence. (It is to be hoped that this argument may have some weight with those too numerous instructors who are deeply fearful of losing dignity if they use visual aids with adult students.)

As I have already pointed out, the most typical group-one activity is probably the repetition of sentences by the students in immediate imitation of the teacher. Yet, the teacher can introduce an element of communication into even this type of exercise by allowing a significant period of time to elapse between the hearing of the model and the attempt at imitation. In a beginning class, this might take the form of returning to a repetition drill after having moved on to some other type of exercise; except that, the second time around, the teacher would ask the students to reproduce such sentences as they could remember without benefit of model. Clearly, in this delayed repetition the possibility of error and the need for the student to draw upon his own inner linguistic resources would be

greater than in the original version of the activity. In an advanced class the teacher could apply the same principle by asking students to retell an anecdote quite some time after he had told it to them.

This would seem to be a good place to consider memorization, especially the memorization of material in dialogue form. The recitation of freshly memorized dialogue, whether it be recited with full comprehension by both participants or not, whether it be in perfectly authentic conversational form or not, cannot be said to involve any considerable element of communication as that term is defined in this paper. It is almost pure manipulation, since the opportunity for the speakers to supply all or part of the language is practically nil. On the other hand, if the teacher encourages students to paraphrase all or portions of a dialogue, then they can certainly move into the area of communication. One wonders why our textbooks so seldom contain versions of dialogues that leave blank some portions of sentences, to be filled in by student improvisation.

Reading and writing

In advanced classes, though the teacher may occasionally need to use a group-one exercise, he should probably place greater emphasis on activities that fall into groups two and three. Since reading plays a prominent role in most advanced classes, it is interesting to apply our scale to various activities usually connected with reading. Following our definitions, we would be forced to classify silent reading, in which no overt linguistic activity of any sort is demanded of the student, as belonging to group one —completely manipulative, hence not often desirable for use in class at the advanced level. Reading aloud in direct imitation of a teacher would also, of course, fall into group one. But reading aloud without an immediate oral model to follow would require the student to supply the appropriate sounds and sound sequences, and would be classified as a group-two activity, and should therefore probably have a place in advanced instruction.

Various types of questioning ordinarily follow reading. In measuring different types against our manipulation-communication scale, we can make good use of Gurrey's well-known classification of questions as step-one, step-two, and step-three. He labels as step-one a question the answer to which can be found in the exact words of the text. Since the student has only to locate and read the appropriate words, questioning of this sort would appear to be a predominantly manipulative activity, suitable as a starting point in advanced classes provided that the teacher then moves on to questioning of a predominantly communicative type, such as step-two and step-three questions. In Gurrey's thinking, a step-two question is one the student can answer by remembering information supplied by the text but not by using the exact words of the text. A step-three question relates to the student's own experience, with its content merely suggested by the text. Obviously, this latter type approaches pure communication; the only remaining control lies in the form of the question itself.

Students in advanced classes are usually asked to write compositions. If these are assigned without advance preparation of any kind, the writing of them is a group-four activity, completely communicative. It is surely preferable to lead up to composition through a series of related group-two or -three activities. Consulting our scale, we might decide to begin the series with a dictation dealing with the content of the eventual essay to be written, then to move on to another dictation on the same subject but one in which sentences are left incomplete, to be filled in by the student, before finally assigning the related composition. Or we might prefer to base the composition on a text that has been read, and to prepare for it through a graded series of questions of a progressively more communicative sort.

PERHAPS I HAVE SAID ENOUGH to permit us to judge whether or not the kind of manipulation-communication scale here described can serve effectively as a theoretical guideline in our organization of classes and textbooks. It seems to be a way of reconfirming, through a new logical approach, quite a few of our established ideas and convictions. On other points, however, it brings us to certain conclusions that we may find upsetting, and therefore challenging.

From the point of view developed in this article, a typical class would be seen as made up of several cycles of activities, with each cycle related to the teaching of a corresponding small unit of subject matter. Within each cycle the activities would be so arranged as to constitute a gradual progression from manipulation to communication. The same progression would characterize the whole movement from elementary to advanced English courses—though at the point where manipulative activities disappear altogether it might be well to stop thinking of the work as teaching English as a second language.

One result of the application of the scale might be a blurring of the sharp line that now separates language courses from literature courses. We might be encouraged to push through more often to communication in elementary language courses. We might realize the naïveté we now frequently display in trusting that our beginners will somehow find adequate occasion outside the class for using communicatively the structures that we have taught them but that they have never so used in class. We might be helped to realize that we simply cannot be sure that our students have mastered a given sructure until we have heard them produce it in a communication situation free of all controls. We might even come to consent to the supreme heresy of including in early literature courses a solid element of manipulation, so that they could make a more direct contribution to the development of language skills.